

Parkdale Book Club

August 2026 – summer reading

2026-2027 Schedule – 2nd Saturday each month, 10 am, Zoom

12 September 26 (Rosh Hashanah)	<i>Are You Somebody?</i> See p7 for link	Nuala O’Faolain	Ruth
10 October (Thanksgiving w/e)	<i>The Master Butchers Singing Club</i>	Louise Erdrich	Lynn
14 November	<i>Finding Flora</i>	Elinor Florence	Beth
12 December	<i>Still Life at Eighty</i>	Abigail Thomas	Ruth
9 January 2027	<i>I Am, I Am, I Am</i>	Maggie O’Farrell	Deb
13 February (Family Day w/e)	<i>How to Read a Book</i>	Monica Wood	Lynn
13 March	<i>How to Share an Egg</i>	Bonnie Reichart	Roz
10 April	<i>The Correspondent</i>	Virginia Evans	Ruth
8 May	<i>When God was a Rabbit</i>	Sarah Winman	Janine
12 June (Shavuot)	<i>Endling</i>	Maria Reva	Lynn

Our book club has a Facebook page. See <https://www.facebook.com/ParkdaleBookClub>

September’s book



Join Zoom Meeting:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/82432011683?pwd=SEgwSFFIOTRZODVtSmVuYW1vOXNwdz09>

Meeting ID: 824 3201 1683

Passcode: 284356

If you're not able to join the meeting, you are welcome to send your comments about *Are You Somebody?* to sloanelm@shaw.ca or bethbalshaw@shaw.ca before September 12th so they can be shared with the group and included in our September Book Club Newsletter.

I love that the subtitle of this book is *The Accidental Memoir of a Dublin Woman*. Accidental! From Goodreads: Nuala O'Faolain attracted a huge amount of critical praise and a wide audience with the literary debut of *Are You Somebody?* Her midlife exploration of life's love, pain, loneliness, and self- discovery won her

Saturday, September 12th at 10:00 am

fans worldwide who write and tell her how her story has changed their lives. There are thousands who have yet to discover this extraordinary memoir of an Irish woman who has stepped away from the traditional roles to define herself and find contentment.

"I was born in a Dublin that was much more like something from an earlier century than like the present day. I was one of nine children, when nine was not even thought of as a big family, among the teeming, penniless, anonymous Irish of the day. I was typical: a nobody, who came of an unrecorded line of nobodies. In a conservative Catholic country, which feared sexuality and forbade me even information about my body, I could expect difficulty in getting through my life as a girl and a woman. But at least--it would have been assumed--I wouldn't have the burden of having to earn a good wage. Eventually some man would marry me and keep me."

"What happened, to make contentment so precarious? I've been trying here to understand the way things worked out in my life. And though what I have written is personal, part of my predicament is general. The challenges of middle age and the challenges of loneliness--which I know exist even within relationships--confront many more people than me, just as the same place I grew up in and the same influences I came under affected more people than me. Teachers used to say, 'Miss Noticebox! You're nothing but a noticebox!' But when adults slap children down and tell them not to be drawing attention to themselves, what are the adults doing? Why do they want the child to stay quiet and go away? Single middle-aged women aren't supposed to kick up, either. Who wants to know about them? If no companion depends on them? If they're nobody's mother? Nobody's wife? Nobody's

lover? If they're not famous or powerful? My problems are banal only because so many people share them."

One of the Goodreads reviewers recommended *Ordinary Dogs* by Eileen Battersby and [Leave Me Alone, I'm Reading](#) by Maureen Corrigan as similar books.

Summer reading

I didn't take the time for this newsletter to email everyone to see what you've been reading since mid-July. Please save your reactions and recommendations for the September newsletter.

Meanwhile, we start this month's book summaries with a *Did Not Finish*. I deserve some credit for not throwing it across the room...

DNF: Polar Bear Dawn, Lyle Nicholson (2013)

This was appallingly bad. I started it because it's the first in the Detective Bernadette Callahan Mystery Series, Callahan being a Métis in the RCMP. And the setting, and the bear... I should have paid more attention to gender of author. First there were so many clichés in general I found myself musing on whether a big enough (what IS the collective noun for clichés?) collection of clichés tips over into plagiarism. Then the biggest one of all – or at least, up the point where I stopped reading: Young Vietnam vets, rejected in the U.S., come to Canada where they are rescued by a young Indigenous woman who sets up a healing retreat for them, including herself and three of her friends making sure each of the young men gets laid four times a day. I wish I could say 'unbelievable.' This is followed by young male journalist who regularly trades sex for information musing about how many chiro appointments it's going to take to recover from sex with a 'big girl.' Barf. And Callahan is in about 20 seconds of the first three hours of the book. 0* It can't get good enough in the next 6 hours to balance the above. It hurts my brain that this book has a 4.08 rating on Goodreads.

The Box in the Woods, Maureen Johnson (2021). I must start reading book blurbs more carefully. Here we have another one coded YA. There is a definite Scoobie gang, Nancy Drew air to it. Still good company for walking and housework. Some good social commentary. Some good humour. This would have been very cool to read when I was 15. Apparently this is one in the Truly Devious series that I would totally follow up if I were 15. "Anxiety is very accommodating. Minutes ago, Stevie's anxiety was all about failure. It neatly converted itself into worry about places called Bounce Houses and not having hot water or air-conditioning. It was perfectly ready to bring the snakes to the party. It's a big tent. All problems are welcome."

"Funny how the world shifts when you're in the same space with your friends. The air is energized, the light is warmer."

3* 20726

I See You've Called in Dead, John Kenney (2026). This is a 'Libby Reads' selection which means there's unlimited availability. Okay, I'll bite. Initial reactions: Meh. Self-consciously cute, irrelevant as most stories about men written by men tend to be, to me. Goodreads described it as "*The Office* meets *Six Feet Under* meets *About a Boy*, a coming-of-middle-age tale about having a second chance to write your life's story." Can it be that coming-of-middle-age stories are even less interesting (to me) than regular coming-of-age? And what can make this all worse? The therapist, a woman, of course, who is AWFUL! Of course. Because that's funny, right? But then, the rest of the novel was much better. Lots of interesting musing about death, and good character development. And an interesting bit where, prefaced by an explanation of why you should never ask a man to describe sex, a man (both author and character) does a very good job of describing sex.

"The greatest wonder is that every day, all around us, people die, but we act as if it couldn't happen to us."

"We do not know where death awaits us: so let us wait for it everywhere. To practice death is to practice freedom."

"I mean, why do we do this thing, wakes and funerals? A sign of respect, of course, for the dead. A sign of respect for the family. But I wonder if it's also for all of us. Each of us here. Surely it's a reminder. But perhaps also a call to a state of grace, if only for a few moments. A pause to remember how fleeting our own mortality is." Averaging across book:

3.5* 25726

What We Can Know, Ian McEwan (2025).

This is a book that needs to be read more than

once. At the beginning, I thought a couple of times, this is very talking heads. And the characterization of experts, of scholars, as knowing more and more about less and less occurred to me too. Tom Metcalfe, an academic and writer living in England in 2119, is obsessed by a poem that was read at a party in 2014 and then lost. A fascinating aspect of the novel is that it's about people from the future reflecting on our times. "Those ancients were ignorant, squalid and destructive louts. As one of the brighter students pointed out, surely they could have done something other than grow their economies and wage wars." The poet that is central in Metcalfe's obsession is vehement in his disdain of the people who are warning about the climate crisis, while Metcalfe's 2119 is the world in which "our numbers fell from 9 to 4 billion" in the Inundation that swallowed vast amounts of Atlantic-facing countries, after a Russian warhead goes off accidentally in the middle of the Atlantic, causing a tsunami that, combined with rising sea levels, wipes out everything but a Europe-wide archipelago of mountain peaks. Britain is now the Scottish Highlands and Islands, and there's no mention of Ireland. "... in the mid-2030s, the Derangement, respectively capitalized, came into general usage as shorthand for the usual list of global heating consequences, a litany that wearied activists and skeptics alike. The term suggests, not only madness, but the vengeful fury of weather systems. There was also a hint at collective responsibility for our innate cognitive bias in favour of short term comfort over long term benefits. Humanity itself was Deranged. The term did not stretch to include the related metaphysical gloom, the collapse of belief in a future, or more specifically the fading of a belief in progress."

The second part is narrated by Vivian, the woman to whom the single copy of the vanished poem was presented as a birthday gift. We've heard what Metcalfe knows of Vivian's life, and now we hear

Vivian herself. What we can know is marked out in stark contrast to what there was to know. Vivian's musings about journaling are significant in that her decisions affected what Metcalfe can know. "I began to worry about the future of my journals after I was dead. . . At the end of my life I might not have the strength to destroy an extended record of myself. But if I was going to destroy it, no point writing it. Subtly my journals were becoming a report of a better self. I would have denied it but over time the entry seize to be private. I had a reader in mind." 5* 1826

Death of the Author, Nnedi Okorafor (2025).

Another book that asks to be read more than once, *Death of the Author* is a masterpiece of metafiction, and would make for a wonderful book-club discussion. I learned a new word: Naijamerican, Nigerian American. This makes sense, as Africa is as monolithic as Europe, so 'African-American' becomes trivializing, dismissive, disappearing -- something. The distinctions between ethnic groups even within Nigeria is portrayed beautifully. Other themes: the immigrant experience; racism; ableism; loss; fame; the power of social media; societal and family pressure... 5* 9826

"I don't think I'm strong enough to be who I am."
 "To listen to a story from a primary source is a great honor,"
 "Stories were the greatest currency to us, greater than power, greater than control. Stories were our food, nourishment, enrichment. To consume a story was to add to our code, deepen our minds. We felt it the moment we took it in. We were changed. It was like falling. It was how we evolved."

Determined: A Science of Life without Free Will, Sapolsky, Robert M. (2023). Sapolsky is a neuroendocrinologist and a very good science writer. This book is dense to read, and worth every effort. I loved the little tidbits of

information, like your gut bacteria collectively weigh more than your brain. A great deal of what we do, what we choose to do, is ultimately related to how lucky a childhood we had. If we have no free will, what are the implications for moral responsibility, the justice system? What we think of as free will – “grit, character, backbone, tenacity, strong moral compass, willing spirit winning out over weak flesh, are all produced by the PFC (prefrontal cortex); (b) the PFC is made of biological stuff identical to the rest of your brain; (c) your current PFC is the outcome of all that uncontrollable biology interacting with all that uncontrollable environment.”

““free will” is what we call the biology that we don’t understand on a predictive level yet, and when we do understand it, it stops being free will.” “we can’t will ourselves to have more willpower.” I have no choice but to give it 5*, having spent a couple of weeks ploughing through it. 9826

Babel-17, Samuel Delaney (1966). What an interesting book, classic sci-fi, focusing on the power of language, with an amazingly smart and strong woman as main character. I loved the pulling together of Rydra’s crew and how they worked together. Some reviewers critiqued this as dated. I read it not knowing when it was written and did not experience it as dated at all. Delany was a published science fiction author by the age of 20 (wrote this at 23-24). In addition to novels and short stories, he published several accounts of his life as a black, gay, and highly dyslexic writer. 4.5* 12826

"Nominative, genitive, etative, accusative one, accusative two, ablative, partitive, illative, instructive, abessive, adessive, inessive, essive, allative, translative, comitative. Sixteen cases of the Finnish noun. Odd, some languages get by with only singular and plural. The American Indian languages even failed to distinguish number. Except Sioux, in

which there was a plural only for animate objects. The blue room was round and warm and smooth. No way to say warm in French. There was only hot and tepid. If there's no word for it, how do you think about it? And, if there isn't the proper form, you don't have the how even if you have the words."

Twelve Months, Jim Butcher (2026). This is the 18th in the series about Harry Dresden, Chicago’s only professional wizard. This is NOT the place to start in your enjoyment of The Dresden Files – begin with #1. It’s worth it. It has been years since I listened to #17 (*Battle Ground* was published in 2020), so part of the pleasure of this one was being reminded of the world building, main characters, previous plots, Harry himself, the humour, and the absolute brilliance of James Marsters as voice actor. A theme of this one is surviving loss. There are some nice little bits tucked in, like Harry explaining to his daughter how to responsibly use the equivalent of AI. Listening to this one made me want to start over with #1, *Storm Front*, and I think I will. Despite the 50 or so books I’ve purchased in the past month. Okay, ‘only’ 8. “Basil,” Basil said touching his own chest, and then went down the stairsteps in order of height. “Bay. Thyme. Cardamom. Sage. Parsley. And Cinnamon.” “Etienne liked to cook,” Bob said sourly. “The Spice ‘Goyle,” I said with a straight face.” “Which was your favorite?” she asked. “You can’t pick a favorite,” I said. “They’re books. They’re pieces of someone’s mind and soul. They’re almost friends.” I started back down the stairs again. “Sometimes a poet speaks best to what’s happening to you. Sometimes it’s a philosopher. Sometimes it’s a storyteller.” “Stop learning, start dying,” I said seriously. “Why I’m a big believer in reading. Any kind of reading. Even reading pure wild fiction, you learn about what someone else feels life is like. Get a different perspective than your own.” “Pain is a fire. That’s true for all of the people, some of the time. If you’ve never had to stand in that fire, be patient: Your turn is coming. Whether the pain is physical or purely mental doesn’t really matter—it turns out that your brain

reacts to it the same way, lighting up many of the same centers of perception. Some brainy types in lab coats proved that one fairly recently. The suffering from a broken heart is similar to that from a gunshot wound, in terms of how our minds react over the long term. It all hurts. When you have to live with that hurt, with that pain, when there's no way to turn it off or get away from it, you start to make adjustments. Your choices in how you deal with your pain determine the course of your recovery. That's why people who go through a difficult ordeal sometimes come out stronger, and sometimes they come out broken—but they always come out... Changed. Pain is a fire."

Remember, send in your thoughts about what you've been reading for September's column.

"If there were nothing else,
reading would—obviously—
be worth living for."

Nuala O'Faolain